

# Using Popular Culture to Enhance Student Participation in Freshman Composition Courses

**Mary T. Nielsen, Regents' Distinguished Professor,  
Professor, Teaching and Reading, East Georgia College**

Students sometimes complain that the materials that are assigned to them are not relevant to their lives. Their world is a big visual, media-oriented world. They watch music videos, watch the so-called *Real World* on MTV, and surround themselves with the music of their generation. Therefore, it is not surprising that statistics suggest that students watch too much television and are passive and uncritical recipients of the information that emanates from the television and movie screens and the radio stations around this country. This same passivity is also found in many college classrooms. Teachers sometimes find that they must struggle to actively engage their students. At a recent SAMLA conference in Savannah, I overheard two professors voice their frustration over lack of student participation somewhat humorously. One said she sometimes tells her classes, "I know you're out there. I hear you breathing." The other agreed, asking if there was not a basic minimal pulse rate requirement for college admission.

In an effort to increase student participation in my composition classes at my former college in Florida, I capitalized on students' interest in the popular culture of film, video, music and television. I have found the following activities to work well with my students, enlivening the classroom and increasing student interest.

## **Definition Essay or Paragraph.**

In introducing the definition essay or paragraph, I have used clips from films and television to focus on the definition of stereotyping and the prevalence of stereotyping in the media. Specifically, I have shown my students brief clips from the Disney film *Peter Pan*. For example, the segment in which the Indians sing "What Makes the Redman Red" is an excellent example of the negative stereotypes used to portray Indians and mothers-in-law. Or a segment from the mermaid lagoon shows the stereotype of the catty, petty, jealous female. Elsewhere in the film, Peter complains that "girls talk too much." A television show that could also be used as a springboard for a discussion of stereotyping is *Married with Children*, where one can observe the dumb blonde, the nerd, the hen-pecked husband, the lazy housewife, and the lazy househusband. These clips illustrate the power of highly specific examples to make a definition clearer to the reader.

## **Causal Analysis.**

After introducing the structure of the cause and effect essay, I have engaged students in discussions of whether the cartoon series *The Simpsons* is a realistic or unrealistic depiction of family life. Only a short ten minute segment of the show is needed to bring the discussion to life, and students typically have strong responses to both perspectives. I then have students work in groups to come up with reasons to support their viewpoint. These groups then share their perspectives with the class. Other television shows that illustrate family life, law, police work, and medicine could work as well.

## **Argumentation.**

In introducing the argumentative or persuasive essay, I typically include a discussion of fallacies and propaganda techniques, stressing that these detract from a sound argument. However, to illustrate the prevalence of these in many discussions and arguments, I have used clips from talk shows to make the point. Talk shows such as *Geraldo Rivera*, *Ricki Lake*, and *Montel Williams* and opinion programs such as *Rush Limbaugh* are easy sources of verbalized fallacies and propaganda techniques. I have also shown taped copies of television commercials to illustrate the different types of emotional appeals (such as the use of glittering generalities, transfer, and bandwagon) used by advertisers. Students seem to enjoy finding the faulty reasoning in televised materials.

## **Comparison/Contrast.**

Of all of the different types of patterns of organization that I have covered in my composition classes, comparison and/or contrast seems to be the one that is the most media friendly. After I introduce the different ways of structuring and organizing the comparison/contrast composition, I use a variety of media as practice materials for my classes. For instance, one election year, I videotaped the presidential and vice presidential debates, showed segments to my classes, and had them compare and contrast the candidates. The exercise enlivened the class, made them more politically aware, and later culminated in a formal paper.

I have also shown video clips from late night talk shows such as those hosted by Jay Leno and David Letterman and had classes compare and contrast these as well. I have also had classes compare and contrast music videos. For example, I showed one class Bruce Springsteen's video *War* and had them compare and contrast it with a protest video by various recording artists called *Sum City*. I have had classes compare and contrast different types of music, bringing my tape player to class to set the mood. I have had students compare and contrast two works of art, and once I had students compare and contrast a photograph of the singer Madonna with a Florentine painting of the Madonna. Working with these highly visual and sometimes auditory media helped my students understand the necessity of specific detail to clarify their points.

I have found incorporating different forms of the popular culture in my composition classes to be rewarding in a number of ways. Students seem to be able to see the relevance of the material more easily and relate the concepts to their lives. In addition, these activities provide my students and me with a change of pace from the typical lecture mode of instruction. Finally, I have found that my students seem to enjoy these materials and therefore participate more enthusiastically than they might otherwise. While some of the specific selections that I have used have worked better than others, I find that the benefits of experimenting with media far exceed the risks. •